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The Mystery of Rutledge Hall
— ON —
"The Cloud With a Silver Lining"

CHAPTER X.

"You will have some tea" she said abruptly, looking up at him with restless shining eyes, in which Stephen could read the agony of fear she strove to conceal, which made his heart ache for her.

"Thank you," he answered, and tried to add a few words; but he could not steady his voice sufficiently, and he took the tea from her in silence.

Her hand was the steeper of the two, then, and she drank some tea eagerly, thirstily, as if her throat were dry and parched; then putting down the cup, she moved over the fire, and said, in the same abrupt manner:

"You must have known I should come home, Stephen. I was anxious to hear all about this terrible business. Did you know of it when you saw me off yesterday morning?"

"I knew this much," he answered, gently, "that Squire Rutledge was dead, that his servants had found him in his library that morning."

"And papa was there?"

"Yes."

"And you let me go!" she said, passionately. "You should have known that I could have borne it better here than there; it is horrible; but—"

"Dr. Arnold wished you to go," Stephen interrupted, gravely. "We hoped to keep it from you for a time."

"How could it be kept from me?" she said bitterly. "All the country knows it now, of course; why should not I?"

Ah, why, Stephen thought sadly, as he stood opposite to her, feeling as if by this thing which Dr. Arnold had asked him to do were beyond his strength. How could he tell her—this woman whom he loved so dearly, for whom he would willingly have laid down his life—that the man she loved was a murderer?

"It is very horrible," Sidney went on trying to speak calmly. "But such things happen at times; and one never knows when— Poor Mrs. Rutledge—it is terrible for her! How does she bear it? Who did it? Is there any suspicion?"

She was talking with feverish eagerness, almost incoherence, and Stephen could see how she was trembling, and knew that it was better she should learn the worst at once. And yet how could he tell her?

"He was quite dead, the papers said," she went on, in the same nervous manner. "Is that so?"

"Yes. He had been dead some hours when Dr. Arnold reached the Hall."

"And—and the papers said that— that Mrs. Rutledge had disappeared. That, of course, is not true; they always put such statements in the papers to excite people's interest. It is not true, of course?"

"It is quite true," Stephen said, gravely; and Sidney, as she stood by the fire, put out her hand suddenly and caught at the mantel-shelf, as if she needed its support.

"Why did she go?" she asked, piteously. "She did— Oh, Stephen, tell me! I can bear anything but this horrible uncertainty. Why do you look at me like that? I am sorry, of course; but I have no special cause for sorrow, have I?"

He caught the little trembling hands in his as she held them out to him, and made her sit down. She was white and trembling, and Stephen knew that what he had to tell her would not be quite unexpected; she was in some measure prepared for it. Still the blow must fall heavily; he could not spare her, much as he longed to do so.

"Sidney, my poor darling, how can I tell you," he said, hoarsely, as she sat looking up at him with haggard, pleading eyes—"how can I tell you? Be brave, dear! There has been a terrible mistake somewhere; but, when Frank comes back, all will be cleared up, I am sure."

"When Frank comes back!" she repeated, faintly. "Has Frank gone away also?"

"Yes," he answered, huskily.

"Why did he go?"

"We do not know. Oh, Sidney, can you not understand the horrible suspicion to which his absence just now exposes him?"

She stared at him for a moment with a horrified unseeing gaze; her white lips parted as if about to speak, but no words came.

"He is not here to clear himself," Stephen went on, brokenly; "and people are so apt to be suspicious, you know, dear, without any ground. They think he has run away to escape punishment."

"Ah!"

The word broke from her almost with a groan, the clasp of her fingers over his relaxed suddenly, and she slunk back in her chair, white, drooping, nerveless, but perfectly conscious still, though Stephen, startled by the sudden collapse of the slender figure, thought she was going to faint.

"People say all sorts of things," he went on, hurriedly, "true and untrue, under the influence of the intense excitement caused by such an event; and of course Frank's absence is unfortunate now."

"Yes, I see; they think he has run away," she said, with a strange hollow tone in the low faint voice. "Ah, why did he go now?—for he is innocent."

"He will come back as soon as he hears," Stephen remarked reassuringly.

"Yes, he will come back."

There was a little silence then, Sidney lay back motionless in her chair, the pallor of her face assuming an ashen-gray hue, her hands drooping by her side, her eyes wide open, but dim and miserable. It seemed to Stephen that the distress she felt had taken away all her strength, she looked so lifeless and feeble; and, when she spoke again, her voice was low and faint, like the voice of one enfeebled by a long illness.

"Even if he does not come back," she said, "they will not think him guilty long. Frank was so good and gentle, he would not hurt any one, notwithstanding that when he was angry he said foolish things. Stephen, do you believe him guilty?"

As the great miserable eyes were turned upon his face, Stephen felt the color rise slowly in it. How could he tell her the truth? How could he say that he believed Frank Greville guilty of such a heinous crime? And yet, as he stood there, his heart was full of bitterness and wrath, and he believed in Frank's guilt as firmly as he believed in his own existence.

"You believe him guilty," said Sidney, calmly; "but you are wrong. Even if all the world believed it, I should hold him innocent. He said wild things truly; she went on, slowly rising to her feet, "and—and she had great influence over him; but—he had promised me, and Frank would keep his word."

"She drove him mad!" Stephen declared, bitterly. "She encouraged and fooled him to the top of his bent. He was but a tool in her hands—Heaven forgive her!"

"Heaven forgive her indeed!" Sidney echoed, faintly, raising her hands to her brow for a moment and pushing back her hair from it. "And she is gone too, you say; and people think that—oh, great Heaven, how horrible!—they have gone together."

A wild peal of hysterical laughter broke from her as she uttered the words, laughter which was more terrible to listen to than any passion of tears or sobs could have been, and which made Stephen shudder as he heard it, while the fever and excitement in her eyes now, the burning flush upon her face, were even more alarming than the listless, mournful calmness of the minute before.

"Sidney, Sidney!" he said, tenderly, trying to take the little hands which moved so restlessly in her agitation. "Hush, dear child! Do not give away—it pains me to hear you."

"They think they have gone together," she repeated, "the murderer and the murdered man's wife! Is not that horrible? And they believe that Frank is capable of such villainess—that he killed the squire to get possession of the squire's wife! And again the peal of hysterical horrible laughter echoed through the room, and the little restless, burning fingers strove to disengage themselves from Stephen Daunt's tender, detaining hands.

Even in the suffering of after years Stephen never forgot the keen pain of that hour. If it had been possible for him then, by the sacrifice of his own life, to bring Frank Greville to her side, cleared of the crime imputed to him, he would have made that sacrifice. To see her, his darling, the dearest thing in all the world to him, the prey to such horror was almost more than he could bear, and the anguish on his face was great enough to recall the unhappy girl in some measure to herself.

"Forgive me," she said faintly, "forgive me. I will not distress you again. See—I am calm now! I wonder why I say those things?"

"He is at the inquest, Sidney."

"There is an inquest, then," she said dreamily, "and the verdict will decide. Stephen, how can we hear? Will you go? You may safely leave me—see how calm I am!"

Calm, poor child, when she was trembling from head to foot in such a way that she could stand only with his support—calm, with those burning eyes and parched, dry lips?

"Dr. Arnold will send immediately," he said, gently. "He promised me, and he never breaks his word, you know; his messenger must soon be here, Sidney."

"Then I will wait. No, I cannot sit down; I must walk," she said, piteously, disengaging herself from his supporting arm. "I am not faint; but it is warm here."

(To be continued.)

Beige and brown silk is used to embroider a small hat of rose beige velvet.

Deep plaits give flares at the sides of a coat which is straight front and back.

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Very Vexing Words

DOUBLE MEANINGS CAUSE MISCHIEF.

Words not infrequently take to themselves a personality and work well or worse according to their interpretation. A recent instance was afforded by the word "withdrawal," used in the negotiations between miners and mine-owners. It was an unfortunate word because it is so ambiguous.

Often a word has an offensive sound and causes trouble. A political leader nearly provoked civil strife by using the word "flap-doodle" in describing the policy of a certain section of his party. He wanted to indicate that there was too much trifling and a lack of the will to fight in a certain section. There was a great stir because the word sounded insulting and few knew its exact meaning.

Afraid to Fight.

The fact is that the word is a relic of the old cock-fighting days. A certain class of fighting cock, when put into the cock-pit, instead of facing its adversary forthwith and getting on with the battle, would strut about with flapping wings, crowing all the while, in the evident hope of frightening the other bird without coming to blows. Such flapping and "cock-a-doodling" was termed "flap-doodle."

The word "protocol" probably did much to bring about the fall of the last Government. Only about one person in a million understood its meaning, and when a word is obscure the meaning imagined is usually a hundred per cent. worse than the dictionary definition.

When the necessity for some form of unemployment insurance became vitally necessary after the war, some-

one referred to it as a "dole." There are two meanings in the dictionary for this unfortunate word. One is "a share distributed," which was what the thing really was; the other is "something given in charity," which is what the thing is not, or, at least, ought not to be. But the latter meaning has brought the whole thing into a good deal of disrepute and may eventually cause trouble.

Not Understood.

The present Earl of Oxford, in a speech in the House of Commons at the beginning of the war, created a class of non-combatants whom he called conscientious objectors. His intention was fair and just, but the phrase became an epithet of the greatest opprobrium, which included real and mock objectors in the same category, and caused much commotion.

Even such words as "Socialist," "Communist," and more especially "Bolshevik"—a word utterly strange and barbaric in its sound—loom up like bugbears to millions who have only the faintest idea of their real meanings. Similarly, the old word Fenian, followed later by Sinn Fein, came to stand for everything that was dreadful and revolutionary. Today anyone who is even suspected of being "Bolsky" is in danger of being mobbed as a dangerous person, however mild his real opinions and conduct may be.

Terms of Contempt.

On the other hand, a lightly-used word may prove a great inspiration. The word "contemptible," applied by the ex-Kaiser to our Expeditionary Force in the early months of the war, probably did as much as anything to cause the men to "stick it."

Similarly, many words used as terms of contempt and reproach have since become titles of honour. Both

the Methodists and the Quakers were so called in contempt, as indeed were the Puritans and the Roundheads. It must not be forgotten either that the word "Christian" was a term of contempt, first used in Antioch by the enemies of the new religion.

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UNDERSTANDING.

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They never question if it hurts, the sting and shock of it they know, They seem like travellers who have been across the way where you must go; There is a strength that you can trust, an understanding deep and true, For in your darkest hour of need they know exactly what to do.

Those who have suffered take with them a sense of pain unto the end. They need not question if it hurts or ask "how shall we play the friend?" Knowing the need of spirits bruised and having braved such anguish through They come into your troubled life and hold the torch of faith for you.

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